New York
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1946

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"Happy Birthday"

The Sun

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

'Happy Birthday' Has Ingenuity and Charm, Beautifully Played by Helen Hayes.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Move over, hits, and make way for a new one—Helen Hayes has come along in an ingenious and charming comedy, "Happy Birthday," in which she does everything except walk a slack wire. And I suspect that she could do that. The new production was installed last night at the Broadhurst by those men of magic, Rodgers and Hammerstein.

"Happy Birthday," written by Anita Loos, is slight and light and sentimental, all dressed up and tricked up. It is slow in starting and sags frequently, but it is presented for all it's worth—and perhaps a great deal more—by two showmen who know what the theater is all about.

Helen Hayes, in the role of a dried-up little librarian who has her night as Cinderella, is marvelous. She sings, dances and gets tight. She does the tango and makes a speech. She holds her perch on a bar stool as it rises twice its height and sways back and forth. She plays a love scene tenderly and beautifully. And as she goes along giving one of the finest performances of her career she carries a scanty comedy right with her.

This new comedy-fantasy, still another play to speak its piece in favor of strong drink, is just a little story of the drab and unloved Addie Bemis, working in a Newark library, who falls in love with a handsome bank teller—and who gets him. Gets him by going to the juke-boxed Jersey Mecca cocktail bar and waiting for him. There, as she takes the first drink of her life and then takes quite a few more, mixing Scotch with Pink Ladys and champagne, she becomes a good fellow and a hellion.

Wonderful things happen to her and all around her. The saloon becomes an iridescent wonderland. Bottles light up, lilies open up, the cash register plays music, plain costumes become dazzling, strangers become hearty friends. And before it's all over Addie Bemis has routed her hussy of a rival, she has cracked her bullying and drunken pa over the head with a bottle—and she has won her banker.

Miss Loos's script needs all the sure and varied playing that Miss Hayes brings to it, all the staging sorcery that Joshua Logan has provided, all the scenic and lighting devices that Jo Mielziner has supplied, all the imaginative contrasts in the Lucinda Ballard costumes — costumes, when seen are similar to those of the first act, with their color heightened and their lines sharpened. And the song written by Rodgers & Hammerstein—it's called "I Haven't Got a Worry in the World"—is a good one. It's when Miss Hayes sings it in the first act that "Happy Birthday," after an interminable beginning, takes hold.

The cast is first rate. Louis Jean Heydt plays the banker, the man from window No. 3, and turns in his best performance since "Strictly Dishonorable." Enid Markey and Grace Valentine are simply immense—Miss Markey particularly—as two good-natured harpies who have dropped into the Jersey Mecca for a couple of shots before going home from the movies. Red-headed Lorraine Miller is shrill, shrewish, good looking and very effective indeed as the two-timing beauty shop employee who loses out to the rampaging Addie. There's an amusing performance from Robert Burton as Addie's roaring old man and another from Harry Kingston as Mr. Nanino.

It's very fine to have Helen Hayes back. She seemed to be the best actress in the world last night. "Happy Birthday" is no epochal play, but it has charm, it is produced with vast ingenuity—and it is worth a dozen "Harriets."

'HAPPY BIRTHDAY.'

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY," a comedy by Anita Loos, staged by Joshua Logan, settings by Jo Mielziner, costumes by Lucinda Ballard and presented by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d at the Broadhurst Theater with the following cast:

Gail	Margaret Irving
Gloriosa	Muss Williams
Dad Malone	Thomas Heaphy
Gabe	Charles Gordon
Bella	Florence Sundstrom
Herman	Jack Diamond
Myrtle	Jacqueline Paige
Juno	Jean Sullivan
Addie	Helen Hayes
Maude	Lorraine Miller
Don	Dort Clark
The Judge	Ralph Theadore
Paul	Louis Jean Heydt
Policeman	Philip Dakin
Ted	Enid Markey
Emma	Grace Valentine
Manuel	Philip Gordon
Margot	Eleanor Boleyn
Bert	James Livingston
Mr. Bemis	Robert Burton
Mr. Nanino	Harry Kingston

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place in the Jersey Mecca Cocktail Bar in Newark, N. J. Act I—Late afternoon. Act II—Immediately afterwards.

Journal American

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

'Happy Birthday At the Broadhurst

By ROBERT GARLAND

This is the one I've been waiting to rave about. How could it miss, this "Happy Birthday"? With Anita Loos as playwright? Joshua Logan as director? Jo Mielziner as designer? Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein as producers? And Helen Hayes as star? Helen in modern dress, with costumes by Lucinda Ballard and hairdoes by that fellow at the Ritz!

But miss it does, this "Happy Birthday." It misses on almost every count. As a play, because it's trite and awkward and phonily fantastical. As a production, because it's slow and muddled and consistently overacted. And as a starring vehicle for Helen Hayes, because Helen is a big girl now and a kiddy-kar is no right thing for her to ride on.

Last night, she rode on "Happy Birthday" valiantly. It was a good try, believe me. And at its best when, tossing Queen Victoria into one wing and Harriet Beecher Stowe into the other, she grabbed herself a microphone and gave out with a brand new ballad entitled — mistakenly, I fear — "I Haven't Got a Worry in the World."

Frankly, I'll not be surprised if that brand new ballad is alive and running when "Happy Birthday" has joined "Ladies and Gentlemen" in the Helen Hayes' forgotten scrapbooks.

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Wishful Writing

Hollywood is heavy handed when it turns to fantasy. And Anita Loos, with days in Culver City and nights at Santa Monica, is no exception. In "Happy Birthday," she is determined to be fantastical, even if it hurts play, players and performances more than it hurts her. Her whimsey has a will of iron; her flights of fancy seldom leave the ground.

So when, on the Broadhurst's stage, she attempts to retell the Cinderella story through a tipsy Cinderella's eyes, her results are not diverting. And her Addie Bemis, an Elwood P. Dowd in petticoats, is not the airy, fairy tippler of Miss Loos' wishful playmaking. From start to finish, she looks and sounds like a pretty good idea gone wrong.

What you've really got in "Happy Birthday" is a New Jersey Cinderella in a Newark cocktail bar. There, she meets Prince Charming, loses Prince Charming and wins Prince Charming just before the final curtain. And to the accompaniment of musical cash registers, talking bottles, flashing lights and "I Haven't Got a Worry in the World."

Maybe, on paper, the idea looks better than it sounds. Maybe if Addie were presented with some counterpart of Harvey, things would improve. A talking bottle doesn't seem to serve.

Acting Up

Under Joshua Logan's direction, "Happy Birthday" gives the impression of being over-played. Last night, everybody acted up instead of down. And I mean everybody, beginning with the addled Addie of Helen Hayes. They all give it the works in 45th st. And the slight little Cinderella story just can't take it.

If directors are as important as they say—and I think they are—they've got to share the blame. It's my belief that "Happy Birthday" could be better than it is. It would be better than it is with more sensitive, which is to say more subtle, direction. Everything about it is overdone. And it, too, is made that way!

Suffice it to say that Helen Hayes shines brightest while singing "I Haven't Got a Worry in the World." But, then, it happens to be the best material she has to work on. Among the lesser players, Jack Diamond over-plays the least as Herman, tender of the Jersey Mecca Cocktail Bar. Dort Clark over-plays the most as Don, the big health-and-strength man around Newark...

Okay, this is one I've been waiting to rave about. And it missed. What I'm wondering is how Helen Hayes got mixed up in it. Maybe she's been seeing too much of Charles McArthur.

New York Post

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

Miss Hayes Seconds O'Neill On Pleasures of Drink

By Richard Watts Jr.

The theatre's message to its patrons this season seems to be that strong drink, instead of a mocker, is sorely-beset mankind's best friend. Where once the drama preached to us, in thundering tracts like "Ten Nights in a Barroom," that alcohol was a monstrous evil which made beasts of its victims, it now whispers cajolingly that the demon rum is actually an angel of delight, bringing relief from heartaches and agonies. The prophets of this new doctrine are the stage's best people, too; first, Eugene O'Neill and the Theatre Guild with "The Iceman Cometh" and now Helen Hayes and Anita Loos with "Happy Birthday."

Where "The Iceman Cometh" advised us that drink brought comfort in dreams and surcease from the ugliness of reality, "Happy Birthday" carries the even more comforting information that it can likewise make us so gay and generally delightful that we enchant our relatives and neighbors and render ourselves virtually irresistible in romance. On the whole, I suspect that its claim for the advantages of wholesale imbibing is perhaps less believable than the more modest promise that Mr. O'Neill makes for it, but, as we all know, Miss Hayes is a very persuasive debater.

Any comparison between the O'Neill drama and the Anita Loos comedy, which opened at the Broadhurst Theatre last night, must not be carried too far, but they do have two things in common, in addition to their mutual defense of drink. Both of them take place in a gin mill characteristic of its period, and both show important characters being most charming when in their cups and not all at their best when sobriety begins to set in. At this point, the drawing of parallels between them might as well be given up.

Simple Plot

The truth is that "Happy Birthday" is an attenuated little comedy without much in the way of writing or imagination to give it eventfulness or continuous interest. It merely tells, without excessive resourcefulness, how Miss Hayes, a mild and inhibited little librarian, thinks that she hates the cocktail bar where a bank clerk she distantly worships does his drinking, but finds, after a few chance quick ones there have made her see the light, that the bar and its inmates are wonderful people, her father has come to respect her and the bank clerk cannot leave her alone.

Although it is my impression that Miss Loos, the author, hasn't done a great deal for Miss Hayes or her producers, the Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein, they have accomplished a lot for her. Jo Mielziner has provided a fine cocktail bar that does all sorts of tricks with lights when the heroine's alcoholic mood demands it, and the whole production has been given a bounce and vitality that keep it moving amiably.

A Field Day

Chiefly, though, it is Miss Hayes, whose field day this is. It seems clear enough that she wasn't attracted to "Happy Birthday" by its qualities as a comedy. What must have excited her about it is that, after playing Queen Victoria, Harriet Beecher Stowe and other admirable but straightlaced ladies of an earlier century, she saw before her a role in which she could sing a Rodgers and Hammerstein song through a microphone, dance a tango, play a juke box, make love under a table and cut up generally.

Given a chance to do so many comfortingly undignified things on the stage, Miss Hayes takes advantage of them with unbounded relish and zest and with all her enormous skill. It is a vaudeville act, a one-woman show, an actress' field day, first of all, and it can be enjoyed as such, but every so often there is a moment or two, such as the love scene under the table, in which real emotion is required, and again you see that Helen Hayes, even if she is taking a kind of on-stage vacation, remains one of the great actresses of the world.

The supporting cast helps out whenever needed. Louis Jean Heydt, for one, is excellent as the bank clerk; Lorraine Miller, for another, is both beautiful and believable as the heroine's discomfited rival, and, for a third, Enid Markey is genuinely funny as a movie-going patron of the bar. I have no high regard for "Happy Birthday" as a play but I have for what Miss Hayes does to it.

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New York World-Telegram

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

'Helen Hayes' 'Birthday' Delightful Fantasy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Helen Hayes' new vehicle, "Happy Birthday" is a delightful and warming fantasy. It can best be described as the kind of thing that leaves an awfully good taste in your mouth.

There is great imagination, surprise and excitement in the production. It has its slow sequences, but a wonderfully resourceful performance by the star and inventive direction make it overall an utterly satisfying evening.

Miss Hayes is playing Addie Bemis, spinster librarian, who is beaten down by a drunkard father, plays the piano for entertainment and is "her own best company"

"Happy Birthday" tells about a few hours she spends in a Newark bar. She has gone to tell a young banker whom she secretly loves, that he is in danger from her father.

Life Takes on Glow.

There is not much story, though everything turns out happily in the end. Addie gets mad at the cheap fiancee of the banker, and starts on a grand tour of the finest liquors.

As she gains confidence life takes on a beautiful glow. Flowers pop out at her and bottles light up, bubble and call her. She sings and dances. She throws her money about making people happy, and is startled that they become her friends.

Egged on by a couple of harpies, she breaks up the banker's romance by summoning his fiancee's lover. And she even ends up by gaining the delighted respect of her father.

Alcoholic Hilarity.

Obviously all this gives Miss Hayes a circus to play with. It is pretty much a one gag show, and it demands herculean ability to keep it progressing.

It is a long way from a horse's neck via pink ladies and champagne to a double scotch. Miss Hayes moves with exquisite facility through an accumulative alcoholic hilarity.

It is a treacherous sort of part because it would be so easy to overplay the early cards and have no tricks left toward the end of the game. But the star lets her binge start rolling easily. There is never a moment in the long part when her voice, her actions or her resources plumb their reserves.

Her reaction to her first hard liquor is masterful, and her growing appreciation of her own brilliant conversation is charmingly humorous. Her delighted surprise at her voice through a microphone is entrancing.

Salty Comments.

The supporting cast is excellent. Louis Jean Heydt makes a completely attractive and understandable banker for the object of Addie's affections. Lorraine Miller, as his fiancee, is sensuous and stupidly deceitful.

Of the other hangers on at the bar, Enid Markey stands out as one of the retired ladies of the evening. She delivers her salty comments in a voice that insinuates and cloys.

Margaret Irving is striking and hard as the mistress of the inn, and Robert Burton puts good humor into his portrayal of Addie's father.

Joshua Logan's direction is tops. Just as Miss Hayes gives the play variety and momentum, he keeps its action building through its mixture of liquored fantasy and reality. There is great variety of mood and emotion to its progression.

If the second half seems slower, the cause is the inherent difficulty of hypoing the single situation with novelty.

Trick Props Effective.

Jo Mielziner has done a splendid job of setting and lighting "Happy Birthday." The trick props, like the table that rises and spreads, or the bar stool that flies in the air, are used for just the right amount of dreamy emotional effect.

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NEW YORK Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

By HOWARD BARNES

Miss Hayes's Party

HELEN HAYES has a rambling romp for herself in "Happy Birthday." Eschewing royal garb and mien, the gifted actress is playing a staid librarian on a toot at the Broadhurst. Her talents are amply sufficient for the occasion. The Anita Loos comedy in which she finds herself is considerably less than satisfying. It takes all of the star's wiles and a deal of cunning stagecraft to evoke and sustain snatches of merriment in the offering. As a friend remarked, the new show is very much like watching Paderewski playing chopsticks.

* * *

As one might have anticipated, Miss Hayes is never wanting, no matter how singular are some of the ollos which frame her performance. Her ascent in a pink balloon of inebriation, as an aging virgin cuts some fancy capers in a Newark cocktail bar is a miracle of modulated giddiness. Her discovery of the first friends she has ever had has even a touching quality and her impulsive romance with the bank clerk, who is her beau ideal, is warmly radiant in her interpretation. As a dramatic situation, it has all the distinction of a third-rate scenario, but Miss Hayes endows it with a certain dignity and splendor.

* * *

Much of this magic derives from the mere fact of having the star involved in a rough-house. Her timing is impeccable, whether a mixture of pink ladies, straight Scotch, creme de menthe and champagne is inspiring her to dance a tango or conk her meddlesome old man with a whisky bottle. The memory of "Victoria Regina" and "Harriet" are not so dim that her portrayal does not have personal as well as theatrical surprise. Actually her material is very shabby. Only her presence makes it sporadically delightful.

* * *

Her assistants have tougher slogging with the Loos script. When the lines have a low-down ring, as they sometimes do, the laughter is spontaneous, but the players too often appear to be groping gingerly for audience response. Louis Jean Heydt is nicely abashed and susceptible as the bank clerk who finds his true love in a barroom. Enid Markey and Grace Valentine have some flavorsome bits as a couple of aging dolls on the prowl and Jack Diamond is just what he should be as a toughly sentimental bartender. Meanwhile, Rodgers and Hammerstein have been better showmen than play pickers with "Happy Birthday." Under Joshua Logan's direction and with Jo Mielziner's decor, the comedy looks like the real thing. It is only a mirage, unless Miss Hayes is exerting her individual sorcery.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 1, 1946

'Helen Hayes' Offers Lively and Pleasant Evening at Broadhurst in Anita Loos Comedy, 'Happy Birthday'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Laying aside the purple for the moment, Helen Hayes is appearing in a delightful, sentimental comedy, "Happy Birthday," which was put on at the Broadhurst last evening. Anita Loos, one-time author of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," has written this humoresque in a Newark beer joint. And don't forget that Miss Hayes, now celebrated for her acting of two great monarchs, was one time the slip of a girl who played captivating roles of disarming innocence in such well-remembered plays as "Dear Brutus" and "Clarence."

With her crowns now stuffed away in the sideboard, she is playing that sort of thing again. Now she brings to it the craft and virtuosity of a superlative actress. For she is not patronizing this simple revelry. She is playing it with the sincerity and magic of an honest actress who enjoys the sentiment, warmth and showmanship of popular comedy, designed for nothing more than a little fun in the theatre.

* * *

"Happy Birthday" is the story of a dowdy Newark librarian who takes a man away from a brisk and knowing huzzy in a saloon on a rainy night. Give Addie Bemis (for that is her name) a few drinks and she becomes irresistible.

But Miss Loos has more to contribute to an evening's amusement than that worn tale of the moth and the butterfly. For "Happy Birthday" is also fantasticated into the portrait of a monumental binge. After Miss Bemis has gulped down two or three pink ladies, one double Scotch and one sloe and goes on from there, the Jersey Mecca Cocktail Bar begins to go round, lights go on and off, bells ring and everything becomes thoroughly distorted.

Collaborating with Miss Loos as the director, Joshua Logan has invented a weird and original performance that vividly depicts everything except the hang-over. By all the known laws about mixing drinks indiscriminately, Addie Bemis must be feeling awful this morning.

* * *

Joe Mielziner has also had some well-deserved enjoyment in designing an animated setting drenched in alcohol. While the rain drips outside, an excellent cast of actors provides a first-rate performance. As the bank clerk who has captured Miss Bemis' heart, Louis Jean Heydt restores to Broadway the shy, squinting, polite character he contrived for "Strictly Dishonorable." Everyone is usually very agreeable in a barroom, and that applies here to Margaret Irving, Enid Markey, Jack Diamond and about anyone you want to mention, including Jacqualine Paige as the faithless jezebel.

But this is Miss Hayes' play, and triumphantly so. In a sentimental band concert, she plays all the stops—pathetic, awkward, bold, swagger, remorseful, defiant, smug, romantic, successful. She dances the tango; she sings like a night-club minstrel. It is hard to say whether it is acting or showmanship. Like the character she is portraying she has gone on an artistic bender, indulging herself in all the tawdry bits that Queen Victoria would disapprove of.

If the result is captivating instead of being cheap histrionics, that is Miss Hayes' personal contribution as a human being. The enchanting qualities that conquered audiences back in the days of "Bab" and "Caesar and Cleopatra" are the qualities that conquer audiences in "Happy Birthday." Part of the sentiment of this show is the memory it awakens of her early parts. Quite a Hallowe'en Miss Hayes and Miss Loos provided last evening!

PM

NOVEMBER 3, 1946

—*Kronenberger*

Cinderella In Newark

PM Reviews

Anita Loos has hitched her wagon to a star—to one of the biggest stars, in fact, in the American theater; and Helen Hayes will be triumphantly pulling it along for many months to come. It needs pulling, as much as most stage vehicles do; it even needs pushing. It is not in the accomplished Miss Loos' best, or even second-best, manner. It is not in any way Miss Loos' evening. But thanks to Miss Hayes, and Jo Mielziner, and Joshua Logan, the Cinderella story Miss Loos has enacted in a Newark honky-tonk manages to chin itself up from a piece of trash to a piece of popular theater.

For Miss Hayes—cast as a staid, lonely librarian who, after a few drinks, has one hell of an evening being gay, giddy, unrepressed and successful in love—*Happy Birthday* is a chance to shoot the works, to dance a tarantella after years of sober waltzing. For some years Miss Hayes has been playing staid librarians who don't get drunk—if that is not too frisky a description for Queen Victoria or Harriet Beecher Stowe. In *Happy Birthday* she has every right to confuse herself with Gertrude Lawrence. She tangoes, she fandangoes, she blares out a Rodgers & Hammerstein tune through a mike, she cuddles under a table with her beau, she sees stools growing taller and bottles lighting up, she lurches and leaps through the air. She does all these things with enormous gusto, the comedienne in her getting her safely over all the vaudevillist's hurdles. She is as brilliantly wrong for some of it as is the librarian she plays; but that is why the effect is mainly right.

Her performance is needed as all the trick lighting and clever scenic detail, all the stage atmosphere and honky-tonk commotion are needed, for the yarn itself dwindles into piffle when it isn't being blown up into absurdity. One trouble with settling for *Happy Birthday* as a pure-and-simple Cinderella fantasy is that Miss Loos is a little too shrewd about life quite to swallow her own formula whole. Miss Loos, who is not by nature a sentimentalist, has made her pie-eyed heroine just female enough, just feline enough, to suggest how really badly a repressed virgin smitten with a bank clerk might misbehave once the lid was off. Had Miss Loos cared to be realistic, along with being funny and touching, she might have shown Addie Bemis having herself a god-awful whale of a time—and ending up with a hangover for life. But Miss Loos did not care—or is it dare?—to be realistic, and *Happy Birthday* accumulates trash for two acts before being covered with it at the end, when Addie is allowed to get her man. This is what Hollywood, I imagine, calls a Broadway ending.

But most of the thousands of people who swarm to *Happy Birthday* will like it just as it is; and I, though increasingly irritated by it, was not bored. Besides Miss Hayes' exuberant performance, there is a funny one by Enid Markey, a fairly funny one by Grace Valentine, and a general level of competence in the cast as a whole.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 1, 1946.

Miss Hayes Does Her Fine Best In Undeserving 'Happy Birthday'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There has been nothing like Anita Loos' new comedy, "Happy Birthday," since the late Herman Hyde played the cello at the Palace. One never could guess what would emerge next from Mr. Hyde's doghouse, but it might be some music, a canary or an ostrich egg. The important part of the Palace act was really Mr. Hyde, and not what came out of the cello; and the important part of "Happy Birthday" is not what comes out of it but who is playing it. The player is Helen Hayes.

Apparently Miss Hayes has been absent from the stage long enough to want very much to get back on it; and like any star with some ambition left, she has wanted to give her public the works. In "Happy Birthday" the Hayes public, of which this reporter is a devoted member, gets the works. The little lady who was a remarkable Queen Victoria and a determined Harriet Beecher Stowe now goes to a saloon, gets stiff on two pink ladies, sings a Rodgers and Hammerstein song and endures a number of hallucinations. Bottles light up and talk to her, a bar stool carries her up to the ceiling and the space beneath a table provides a convenient love nest.

A Wonderful Comedienne.

Miss Loos' play is a lot of junk and not too brightly written. Jo Mielziner's trick scenery is quite amusing, but the important part of "Happy Birthday" is Miss Hayes. I'm a little embarrassed for her at having come upon her in so much junk and such noisy trappings—but Hayes in anything is infinitely better than no Hayes at all. She is a delightful and amazing actress, and in "Happy Birthday" she is a wonderful comedienne.

The play is best described as a vehicle—a vehicle with all the frailties of the late Joe Jackson's bicycle, which always fell apart just as Joe got it going. It is a combination of "The Iceman Cometh" and "Cinderella"—both good plots.

Miss Hayes, as Cinderella (a prim and mousy librarian), comes into a joint in Newark called the Jersey Mecca Cocktail Bar. Here she encounters as many saloon characters as "The Iceman" has—trollops, mugs, tarts, politicians and bartenders. She also finds a young bank official of whom she is timidly enamored.

Under the influence of a couple of pink ladies, topped with a few other drinks, she has a fine but hazy time as she changes from a drab to a siren. I had a fine time, too, last evening—but I'll bet it was hazier than Miss Hayes' because I wasn't so used to all that Loos talk.

Producers Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein have given their star the company of some pleasant actors, including Margaret Irving, Florence Sundstrom, Jacqueline Paige, Jean Bellows, Louis Jean Heydt and Enid Markey. And Mr. Mielziner's scenery blows its top and emits plastic oubbles. What more could a star ask if she wanted to come back to the stage and couldn't find a good comedy?

"Present Laughter"

The New York Times

OCTOBER 30, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although "Present Laughter" is one of Noel Coward's unworthiest enterprises, this review will not be so dolorous as the occasion warrants. For, good or hackneyed, Mr. Coward can give casual lines hilarious inflections, and his whole point of view toward ordinary affairs is suitably crack-brained. At the moment he is writing a narrative of inferior quality—conventional, unimaginative and generally commonplace; and although Clifton Webb acts the chief part brilliantly, the pace of the performance would be slow even for a burial.

At the opening performance, the comedy also had the misfortune to be acted before a particularly competitive audience that held the curtain twenty minutes, kept coming in for another twenty minutes and could find its seats only with the greatest difficulty when the play was impertinent enough to resume operations.

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But Mr. Coward, cannibal-like, is now writing about people of the theatre who have an eccentric attitude toward normal affairs. His central figure is a celebrated and popular actor who is managed by a few close friends and who is afflicted not only with personal vanity but by the indiscriminate admiration of young and old girls and at least one serious young dramatist.

As for the story, Mr. Coward ought to feel a little guilty about it. French farces have an unsavory reputation for worn-out craftsmanship; and "Present Laughter" is no whit better. But this playgoer forgives any maker of joint-pieces who can bounce comic lines off old pieces of bric-a-brac as neatly as Mr. Coward does now and then in this escapade. "That is no prostitute," says his actor, rising gallantly to the defense of the woman who has been spending the night in his apartment. "That is the wife of my dearest friend."

* * *

Towards the theatre Mr. Coward maintains the selfish insouciance that is dryly amusing. To the bad news that his leading lady has just broken her leg, the star in Mr. Coward's play has no comment except a vexed: "Well, really!" At the close of the comedy the star's angriest mistress interrupts some talk about renting the Forum Theatre by calling him a cad and slapping his face. No one in the room pays the slightest attention to her intrusion. They continue quarreling about the new lease. However much Mr. Coward's invention lags in "Present Laughter," he is still master of the quick and impudent sardonic line.

* * *

To house the characters suitably, Donald Oenslager has created an enormously attractive apartment with a fine old print of London flung overhead. Under John C. Wilson's direction the performance is almost intolerably sluggish. But the acting is immensely expert. In the chief part Clifton Webb is giving one of his most skilful performances—vain without being precious, overbearing without being fatuous.

Evelyn Varden, who has never yet given a poor performance, brings all her acidulous humor to the pleasant part of the secretary. Doris Dalton as the worldly wife is giving her most accomplished performance. As the wicked enchantress, Marta Linden plays with a very attractive sinful style. Jan Sterling has a particularly disarming scene in the first act as an inexperienced student of amour. Something should be said in praise of Cris Alexander's belligerent acting as a fairly intellectual admirer.

"Present Laughter" is a poor thing, but Mr. Coward's own. The story is not so much trifling as trite. But the attitude towards everything that ought to matter is sharp, withering and funny.

'PRESENT LAUGHTER.'

Play by Noel Coward; staged by John C. Wilson; setting by Donald Oenslager; costumes designed by Castillo; other costumes supervised by Sylvia Saal; presented by John C. Wilson at the Plymouth Theater Tuesday evening, October 29, 1946. The cast:

Daphne Stillington	Jan Sterling
Miss Erikson	Grace Mills
Fred	Aidan Turner
Monica Reed	Evelyn Varden
Garry Essendine	Clifton Webb
Liz Essendine	Doris Dalton
Roland Maule	Cris Alexander
Morris Dixon	Gordon Mills
Hugo Lipplatt	Robin Craven
Joanna Lipplatt	Marta Linden
Lady Saltburn	Leonore Harris

SYNOPSIS—The action passes in Garry Essendine's studio in London. Time: The present. Act I: Morning. Act II, Scene 1: Evening. Three days later. Scene 2: The next morning. Act III: Evening. A week later.

PM

OCTOBER 31, 1946

—*Kronenberger*—

Noel Coward In Poor Form

PM Reviews

Present Laughter is Noel Coward at something like his worst. The great trouble with merely clever writers is that they carry all their money in their pocket and have nothing to draw on at the bank. When Mr. Coward isn't amusing, he's nothing at all—not the least bit believable, not the least bit likeable. When, as in *Present Laughter*, he is clearly at his wit's end, he has little to fall back upon except a sort of brittle nastiness that he hopes will pass for wit. And worst of all, when his talent walks out on him, his taste does also.

Mr. Coward's best talent has always seemed to me to run toward fanciful fooling and satirical nonsense, rather than toward drawing-room (or bedroom) artifice. It shimmers gaily in such a polite extravaganza as *Blithe Spirit*, it gleams amusingly in such ditties as *Mad Dog and Englishmen* and *The Stately Homes of England*. The few really funny bits in *Present Laughter* are of just this fanciful or nonsensical sort; the about equal number of successful smart cracks in the show are successful at a far lower level. And these moments aside, there is hardly anything in *Present Laughter* that can be considered successful at all. It is a slow, tired, rather desperately bad-mannered kind of play, centering in an adored and self-adoring matinee idol.

* * *

Such a hero, with his vanities and pretences, with his professed craving for "peace" and patent love of theatrics, is obvious—possibly too obvious—Coward material. And since Mr. Coward himself played the part in London, his Garry Essendine is not without Coward qualities; is certainly as insulting as he is amorous, as flippant as he is flamboyant, as cynical as he is vain. His life itself isn't hard to diagram. There is a retinue of secretaries, valets, producers and the like to keep Garry pacified, and of married women and young girls to shatter his peace. He enjoys the attentions of either while protesting those of both.

There is no reason why he shouldn't have made an amusing figure, but the fact remains that he isn't one. Mr. Coward hasn't proved bright enough with his dialogue or inventive enough with his situations. The play takes an insufferable time to get going, and then only goes round and round, one incident repeating another, one remark rephrasing another. And as much of *Present Laughter* seems to me shoddy as seems dull.

Nor is the production at all expert. Clifton Webb can be immensely slick and suave, but his personality remains distinct from Essendine's, and he gives a performance rather than a portrayal. Such others in the cast as Doris Dalton, Marta Linden and Jan Sterling try hard, but lack the finish required by their parts; and of the whole company only Evelyn Varden, always an immensely resourceful actress, comes up to scratch. There is a good set by Donald Oenslager.

—Louis Kronenberger

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 30, 1946

= *By* HOWARD BARNES =

The Noel-Clifton Touch

FROM the clown's song in "Twelfth Night" Noel Coward has plucked a phrase for honeyed and malicious elaboration in his new comedy. "Present Laughter" is debonairly castigating as the author contemplates a stage star and his assorted satellites. Disarmingly, he calls his piece light, and that it is. There are stretches, particularly in the first act, when the very brittle nature of the play makes it heavy. What matters is that the mirth is there to sustain high gayety in scene after scene, and that Clifton Webb and his associates give it delicate shadings in an elegant performance.

It may be charged that the Plymouth Theater offering is vastly remote, as it dissects the foibles and feelings of fancy characters with a wicked wit. "Present Laughter" is no more remote than any perceptive comedy of manners. It is its fragility rather than its lack of profound social significance which makes it something less than first-rate Coward, which is very fine indeed. The tongue is too apparent in the cheek for the full satisfaction that one may derive from a work that is both wise and witty. Still, it has its say with eloquence and brilliant theatrical effect.

Coward has been calculatingly impish in this travesty on the world of the theater. One suspects that there is more than a little autobiographical material in the piece. For all the brilliance of the Webb portrayal, the central character, as he struts around in gaudy dressing gowns, complicating life where it is uncomplicated and vice versa, asks for Coward acting, as it had in London. The author has pilloried his hero, but it has given him an opportunity to satirize a multitude of human frailities. Meanwhile he has spun his plot with the random gyrations of a yo-yo, so that an enamored female in the doings may be excused for complaining that she feels trapped in a French farce.

Lines and situations are fused frequently enough in "Present Laughter," to achieve rare moments of comic surprise. The consternation of the actor, as fugitive affairs embroil him with his oldest friends and several newcomers who break through his pose of sardonic charm is evolved with scintillating craftsmanship. The dialogue you will be hearing repeated for some time. The piece itself is worthy of recollection. Light and ironic though it is, it makes for more than a little irresistible entertainment at the Plymouth.

Webb is splendid as the middle-aging star, who is confounded by his own superficiality. He is the master of genteel rudeness and it serves him in good stead here. Doris Dalton is somewhat triumphant as the wife from whom he is separated but upon whom he is inevitably dependent and Marta Linden is slyly seductive as "the wife of his best friend." Then there is Cris Alexander, giving a superb portrayal of a wacky youngster who tries to jolt the actor out of his studied unconcern and good bits by Evelyn Varden and Jan Sterling. John C. Wilson has staged the piece to perfection and Donald Oenslager's single setting is nicely appropriate to the farcical interplay. "Present Laughter" is not heady, but it is immense fun.

The Sun

OCTOBER 30, 1946

'Present Laughter,' Offered at Plymouth, Is More Webb's Play Than Coward's.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Noel Coward's "Present Laughter" is far from being Noel Coward's best comedy. It is not continuously or devastatingly funny, but it offers a measure of entertainment and a precise, sharp and well-sustained performance from Clifton Webb. The first showing was given last night at the Plymouth before a glittery and badly behaved audience.

"Present Laughter," given a glossy production by John C. Wilson, is frequently a lagging comedy. A lot of it now seems dated and all too, too familiar. There is quick, glib talk in it, however, and the Cowardesque drolleries often come to the aid of tiresome interludes. And Clifton Webb holds his ground, even though the author often lets him down. It is really more Webb's show than Coward's.

"Present Laughter" is all about one Garry Essendine, popular and pampered London actor, and his cozy group. This group consists of his two business partners and his patient and devoted wife, from whom he is separated.

Garry is given to affectation and smug seduction. Just as he is making preparations to sail for Africa for a tour his troubles begin. A stage-struck blond ingenue finds herself madly in love with him and occupies his spare room for the night. A sultry brunette, who is married to one of his associates and who is mistress to the other, decides to add the harried Garry to her conquests. She also has a go at that spare room. There are general complications and a showdown. Little wonder, then, that Garry, after delivering a talk on the general futility of sex, decides that the conventional life has its points and walks out with his wife.

Clifton Webb is enormously amusing as the strutting Essendine, quite a weary philanderer before the evening is done. Evelyn Varden is brisk and acrid as the long-suffering secretary to the great man, and Jan Sterling, in the role of the starry-eyed ingenue, goes after her hero as if she really means it. Cris Alexander is very funny as an overpowering young playwright. But the handsome Doris Dalton, as the wife, and the equally comely Marta Linden as the menacing Joanna, are no more than passable. Miss Dalton has a way of playing too many of her scenes to the audience and Miss Linden is not too certain of herself at any time.

Donald Oenslager, putting in quite a fall, has designed a fetching interior, which well might be Coward's own studio flat in London. John C. Wilson has directed.

"Present Laughter" is second-best Noel Coward, but it still has enough waggish moments to afford a generally entertaining evening.

New York Post

OCTOBER 30, 1946

Noel Coward's New Comedy Has Transatlantic Lapse

By Richard Watts Jr.

Apparently there is something that an ocean crossing can do to a play—or to a playgoer. In London in the spring of 1943 I saw Noel Coward's "Present Laughter" with the author in the leading role and found it one of the freshest and most amusing of his comedies. Last night I saw it again at the Plymouth Theatre, this time with Clifton Webb, who is by way of being Mr. Coward's American acting counterpart, and discovered to my consternation that it was pretty tedious for most of the time and only intermittently hilarious.

It is possible to think of several reasons for the difference. For one thing, there was a piquant quality in the idea of Mr. Coward acting a performer very like Noel Coward and satirizing him shrewdly that was amusing in itself. Done as the author's frank and ironic self-portrait, "Present Laughter" achieved a critical and satirical point that is unfortunately absent from a production which is more concerned with the narrative of its central character's adventures in sex than with Mr. Coward's wry and amused comment on his own frailities.

Mr. Webb, as every one knows, is an excellent actor, with a suave and waspish comedy method which has a style all its own. But where Noel Coward playing Noel Coward, and laughing at him with disarming candor, added to the work a humorous conceit of considerable savor, Clifton Webb acting an amorously successful star of the London stage in a production less interested in the satirical than in the plot aspects of the play seems somewhat less successfully occupied.

World of Its Own

Then, too, there was the time and place of the original presentation. In wartime London, in the days when the chances of Allied victory appeared a little precarious and the Luftwaffe was still overhead, this comedy dealing with nothing more momentous than romantic escapades and temperamental actors took on a kind of distant, timeless, escapist charm and created a world of its own as attractively artificial as the witty and graceful universe of Oscar Wilde's plays. Now, as we emerge into our questionable postwar existence, the quality that we took to be almost wistfully gracious turns out to be merely dated and a bit outmoded.

Wherever witnessed and under whatever conditions, "Present Laughter" is the story of the tribulations of an actor given to acting off the stage, who lives under the profound delusion that he wants to be let alone and is greatly disturbed by the interference of friends and admirers. Of course, in actuality, he is never so happy as when in the midst of activity and confusion. It is the story, too, of his relationship with several women: the oversexed wife of one of his friends, a hero-worshiping girl, his understanding ex-wife and one of those inevitable sharp-tongued but loyal secretaries. It takes a long time to get started.

Old-Time Coward

There are scenes in it that still seem amusing and lines that have the old-time Coward sharpness and wit, and, on behalf of the play, it can be said that they grew more numerous with each succeeding act. But there are long, dull stretches when the plot is getting started, and the encounters with the women have a way of growing monotonous and a bit tiring. It is upon these occasions that the brittleness and superficiality, rather than the wit, gayety and style, of the Coward comedy gift seem to predominate.

Being the effective comedian that he is, Mr. Webb is alert and amusing as the debonair actor, but it is my impression that this is not one of the happiest of his roles. Nor is he completely helped by the other performances, which are competent but hardly exceptional. For example, in the London production, the role of a wild-eyed young playwright who makes the central character his unwilling hero was brilliantly played, while here it is managed only fairly well by Cris Alexander.

Forgive me for returning to that English version once more, but in it an actress named Judy Campbell was enormously exciting as the sexy lady who serves as a sort of menace. Here Marta Linden, though she plays skillfully enough, makes the role seem considerably less important. Of the players, Evelyn Varden is happiest as the secretary, a character always well played on the American stage. "Present Laughter" is, I find to my surprise, Mr. Coward at his second best.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 30, 1946

Hero of 'Present Laughter' Tired Of It All—and May Be Right, Too

By JOHN CHAPMAN

On the theory that girls always make passes at men who are asses, Noel Coward has written, in "Present Laughter," a comedy about a typical Noel Coward actor. Clifton Webb struggles manfully through a welter of women, voicing crisp remarks in his impeccably expert fashion, and a handsome supporting company positively exudes worldliness.

But "Present Laughter" is second-rate Noel Coward—tired, middle-aged Noel Coward, perhaps, just like the actor fellow Webb depicts. It has many moments of good, sharp fun, thanks to some excellent quips which are typical of the author at his best. But between the quips there passes a rather long night in the theatre; the jokes are all right but the situations, not very exciting to begin with, become repetitive. Mr. Webb gets seduced by everybody, including his wife.

This actor chap is a Mayfair darling. Fun takes him where it finds him, which is always in his handsome flat, where he wears dressing gowns. Almost nightly, it seems, some impassioned wench loses the latchkey to her own home and asks this fascinating fellow to put her up in his spare room. This he always does, and they always come out in the morning wearing dressing gowns and demanding food.

Discount in Advance.

Mr. Coward tries frequently to discount the structural and thematic frailties of his play in advance, by having a player make a disarming statement. Thus, at one point, a woman being kept in the spare room because of a complication of visitors remarks—by telephone—that she feels as though she were in a French farce. She isn't, and it would be a better comedy if it were. The pace, at least, would be swifter.

The people who frequent Mr. Webb's flat are theatrical — a would-be actress, a female secretary, a couple of producers, a couple of wives of the crowd, a serious playwright. Even the playwright, a boy, displays a disturbing yearning to be in the great actor's company, although not necessarily in the spare room. They squabble vociferously over the actor, who, instead of manfully resenting the fix Mr. Coward has put him in, frequently wishes he were dead.

Quite a bit of the squabbling is, as I say, good, nasty fun, with Mr. Webb and Evelyn Varden—very fine as the cynical secretary—handing most of the cracks. Sample: He, wearily contemplating a tour of Africa in repertory, says he can fancy himself now fighting for breath beneath a mosquito net. "Who with?" snaps Miss Varden.

Two Handsome Women.

Doris Dalton is the amused, detached and estranged wife of Mr. Webb, who makes the ending of the play a practical one if not a happy one by seducing him. The first of the ladies to inhabit the spare room is Jan Sterling, a nice young blonde, and the second is Marta Linden, a slinky brunette.

The gentlemen include Cris Alexander, who is amusing as the intense dramatist; Gordon Mills and Robin Craven as a couple of managers, and Aidan Turner as a comedy valet. This last-mentioned role is one of the sloppiest jobs Coward ever turned out; Philip Barry did the same job much better the time William Gargan was Leslie Howard's man in "The Animal Kingdom."

Donald Oenslager's setting is swank. Producer John C. Wilson laid out the whole thing at the Plymouth Theatre last evening before an El Morocco-bound, one-quarto audience.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 30, 1946

Coward's New Play On With Offstage Amours

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Noel Coward's new play, "Present Laughter," has some good obvious farcical laughs in it, but they are a long time coming.

If anyone but Mr. Coward had written this opus, it would not have had the helpful cast and production it boasts. On the other hand, it might not seem such a letdown if turned out by an author of less reputation.

Coward has embroidered a live-for-today philosophy on the subject of a matinee idol's offstage amours. The interplay consists of ladies in a state of competition, and men in a state of jealousy. The actor is harassed to death and loves it.

In conclusion he points out to the others that his fickleness is honest pleasure. Their deceiving inconstancy is emotional indulgence.

It takes a good half of the play to get this uncomplicated idea going. The first act is wordy with exposition about people you have not seen, and events that have already happened. It is certainly not in the deft Coward tradition.

After that things pick up. Mr. Coward knows better than to devote a third act to clearing up complications. He makes them more devious until a moment before the curtain.

Unfortunately he relies pretty heavily on doors and bells. The humor comes from repeats on earlier situations, and immediate duplication of business by different characters.

It feels more slapstick than smartly explosive, though occasionally there is a dry fuse among the damp fireworks. When one of those goes off the bang is violent.

Coward undoubtedly wanted to do this comedy for his depressed country in a hurry. Now too much of it seems like one of his lightly spun frames without the addition of his sparkling dialogue.

Scathing with Charm.

"Present Laughter" is held together almost entirely by Clifton Webb's slickly petulant performance as the actor. He is scathing with charm, and keeps his school of girl friends in line with bored delight at their attentions.

The character has moments of the most flagrant phoniness in his behavior. Webb reads these scenes with such implication of sincerity that it is often minutes before you realize what he is really up to. The result is that he gives that rarely excellent performance of the part of an actor.

When he has long serious speeches, they are first imbued with a mercurial conviction of truth. As the offstage star tires, this fades into purest thespian quoting.

Timing Starts Uproar.

Webb delivers a subtle and thoroughly satisfying performance.

Evelyn Varden, as the star's secretary, has her talented way with some routine speeches, which she makes funny though you may not know why. When she has a real laugh to deliver, she ejects it with a timing that starts an uproar.

In this avid female company of her husband's pursuers, Doris Dalton makes an understanding and mellow wife for the idol to count on. She is patient up to a point, then good-humoredly clears up a situation before it can tell too seriously on the actor's nerves.

Marta Linden is a thoroughgoing witch as the wife of the actor's manager and the mistress of his playwright, who is bound to add the star to her string.

Jan Sterling is vivid, and youthfully blatant as the newest comer to his stable. Cris Alexander makes a mad young idolater exuberant and frighteningly sincere.

The indignantly cuckolded friends of the star are played by Robin Craven and Gordon Mills.

John Wilson keeps the play moving more lightly than most of its lines, and Donald Oenslager has given it a handsome setting.

Journal and American

OCTOBER 30, 1946

'Present Laughter' At Plymouth Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

There were three performances last night at the Plymouth Theatre. The first was that of Noel Coward's "Present Laughter," taking place up on the stage. The second was that of Noel Coward's apostolic audience, taking place down in the auditorium. The third was that of Noel Coward's open-air disciples, taking place out on the sidewalk. I can't make up my mind which was the least attractive.

The play, labeled "a light comedy," was neither light nor comic. Nor much of a play! The audience, labeled "the season's smartest," was, as a matter of fact, the season's most ill-mannered. The open-air disciples were so undisciplined that even the New York Police Department could not keep them in order. Getting safely in or out of the playhouse in W. 48th st. was practically impossible.

The getting in was scarcely worth the trouble. Having fought the Cowardians out on the sidewalk, you found yourself confronted with more Cowardians within the auditorium. Each were equally objectionable. Each, in their own way, were noisome, crude and extremely scant of courtesy. Outside, they pushed and pulled and demanded autographs. Inside, they pulled and pushed and yoo-hoo-ed to one another.

Inside and out, they paid no enraptured attention to their dear Noel's "light comedy." They enjoyed themselves, not Mr. Coward. And they made the playgoing tougher!

• • •

Noel! Noel!

Well, their dear Noel let them down this time. "Present Laughter" is infrequently Cowardian. Maybe it seemed brighter and better when the author-actor, himself, in person, pretended to be Garry Essendine a season or two ago in London. With Mr. Coward in the dressing gowns affected hereabouts by Clifton Webb, this alleged "light comedy" might be something else again.

Without Noel Coward in those dressing gowns, "Present Laughter" is merely a long-winded, repetitious and unfunny conversation-piece about the aforesaid Garry Essendine and all the people—men, women and himself—who are enamoured of his devastating personality. His studio is filled to suffocation with admirers hanging on his every word while awaiting to follow him to Africa.

Or Australia? No matter! His wives and his friends' wives, his friends and his friends' friends, his valet, his secretary and his cook, love him oh so dearly; his spareroom is forever filled with worshippers who have lost a latch-key. After four helpings of I-love-Garry ya I-love-Garry, Garry-loves-Garry, this Garry-loving is more than even a true Cowardian can take.

Last night, at the Plymouth, it was more than I could take. And I stopped being a true Cowardian along about the season of "Point Valaine." Nevertheless, I stayed right on, not taking it!

• • •

Does Noel Know?

And not liking it at all, either. Not liking it in spite of Clifton Webb's wholehearted impersonation of Noel Coward being just too, too Cowardian as Noel Coward's Garry Essendine. Nobody on this side of the Atlantic and on that side of the footlights can carry off a dressing gown with more Cowardian flair than Mr. Webb. But he can't act on dressing gowns alone!

Evelyn Varden is her brilliant, brittle self as Monica Reed, a Prossy Garnett in Coward's clothing. Hers is the best performance in the best part in the alleged "light comedy." The others, in gowns by Castillo and makeup by Matchabelli, in suits by Williams and robes by Sulka, on carpets by the New York Hotel and Theatre Carpet Co., do as they have been told.

And even if I don't think the direction of John Wilson, the producer, is what Noel Coward would call inspired, I don't see how a more inspired director could improve "Present Laughter." For, despite the pushing and pulling of the Cowardians on the sidewalk, and the pulling and pushing of the Cowardians in the auditorium, this "light comedy" at the Plymouth just isn't there...

As Marlon Brando exclaimed when offered the role of Roland Maule:

"Doesn't Noel Coward know that people are hungry everywhere?"

And, come to look at them, play, players and playgoers do seem quite desperately outdated.

"The Playboy of the Western World"

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 28, 1946

Good Writing, Well-Spoken, Makes New 'Playboy' Revival an Event

By JOHN CHAPMAN

When good writing is well-spoken in the theatre it is an event—and such an event was the arrival at the Booth Theatre on Saturday evening of J. M. Synge's lyric comedy, "The Playboy of the Western World."

Theatre Incorporated has given this play about a moon-touched Irish braggart an admirable production, with Burgess Meredith in the title role and such players as Fred Johnson, J. M. Kerrigan, Mildred Natwick and Eithne Dunne to keep him company and help him along—although, to my opinion, the capable Meredith needs little helping.

This is not exactly an Ould Sod version of a delightful play, for the actors are a mixed lot of imported Irish and domestic Broadway and Hollywood. Their accents are not all evenly matched, as his boasts are not proved hollow.

Wisely, Mr. Meredith does not attempt to match his accent with the true Irish of Miss Dunne and Mr. Johnson or the well-remembering tongue of Mr. Kerrigan; but in his voice and in his bearing he catches the soaring quality of the playwright's prose.

Miss Dunne, a visitor from the Gate Theatre, is just right in the role of the girl the Playboy yearns for. Mr. Johnson, an Abbey Theatre alumnus, is immense as the father who won't stay murdered long enough for the Playboy to win his girl.

Mildred Natwick, being one of the best character comediennes we have on Broadway, is good fun as the man-hungry Widow Quin, and I like Mr. Kerrigan's way of underplaying a drunk. Another of the drunks, who is more Nugent than Irish, is J. C. Nugent, and Dennis King Jr. is amusing as that timid lout, Shawn Keogh.

"The Playboy of the Western World" is nice to meet up with at any time, and its current production is always competent and, occasionally better than that.

'The Playboy of the Western World.'

Play by J. M. Synge; staged by Guthrie McClintic; scenery and costumes by John Boyt; presented by the Theater Incorporated at the Booth Theater Saturday evening, October 26, 1946. The cast:

Margaret Flaherty, called Pegeen Mike ..... Eithne Dunne
Shawn Keogh ..... Dennis King Jr.
Michael James Flaherty ..... J. M. Kerrigan
Philly Cullen ..... Barry Macollum
Jimmy Farrell ..... J. C. Nugent
Christopher Mahon ..... Burgess Meredith
Widow Quin ..... Mildred Natwick
Susan Brady ..... Mary Divney
Honor Blake ..... Sheila Keddy
Nelly ..... Julie Harris
Sara Tansey ..... Maureen Hapleton
Old Mahon ..... Fred Johnson
Villagers: Robin Humphrey, Edith Shayne, Mary Lou Taylor, Mary T. Walker, Paul Anderson, Elmer Barlah, Charles Martin, James L. O'Neil, Ford Rainey.

New York Post

OCTOBER 28, 1946

Burgess Meredith Triumphs in Brilliant Irish Comedy

By Richard Watts Jr.

In a lifetime of reasonably steady theatre-going, I have attended perhaps eight productions of Synge's incomparable comedy, "The Playboy of the Western World," both here and in Dublin. To go in for no hedging whatsoever, the one which the up-and-coming young organization known as Theatre Incorporated offered at the Booth Theatre Saturday night, with Burgess Meredith in the title role, seems to me the finest and most striking of them all, just as Mr. Meredith's is the most completely satisfying performance of the central character. In a few words, this is the theatre at its distinguished best.

I take it that after all of these years and all the controversies and flying missiles which have enlivened its turbulent history, "The Playboy of the Western World," which was first produced in Dublin in 1907, is now generally accepted as not only one of the great glories of the Irish drama but one of the authentic masterpieces of the modern world theatre. In truth, you would have to go back to the Elizabethans to find a comedy that sings so gloriously, laughs so robustly and broods with such ironic compassion over the frailties of the human spirit.

In its lilting Anglo-Irish speech and its contemplation of small people in a far, poor district of a forlorn land, in its story of a pitiful youth who has his moment of fame in the execution of a dubious deed, this true comedy classic might have seemed parochial in its interest and in its appeal. But it happened that John Millington Synge was a playwright of the brotherhood of Shakespeare and his fellow Elizabethans, and "The Playboy" was the distillation of what can without embarrassment be called his genius.

Superb Play

So, instead of remaining a comedy about little men and women in a forgotten corner of a small and troubled country, it became, through its song, its laughter and its poet's insight, a superb play with universal implications and timeless understanding of humanity in general. Its Irish peasants, pub keepers and vagabonds take on epic proportions and become deathless characters of an ever-living drama.

But what, above all, makes "The Playboy" so unforgettable is, beyond the lyric distinction and ironic contemplation, its warm, rich humanity, its superb laughter and its deeply touching emotional appeal. It is not only a great comedy; it is fine, hearty entertainment. It is a play to be enjoyed for its fun and its dramatic interest as well as admired for its brilliance.

Such a comedy demands playing that has style and stature. In recent years, the Abbey Theatre—whose finest glory is that it produced "The Playboy" in a day when sensitive patriotic emotions were foolishly aroused against it—has taken its quality so much for granted that it has virtually tossed it on the stage. Wisely, Theatre Incorporated has presented it with sympathy and understanding. Guthrie McClintic has staged it knowingly and John Boyt has provided admirable scenery and costumes.

Meredith's Brilliance

Best of all Burgess Meredith received the role of the frightened fugitive, Christy Mahon. Not even in his memorable portrayal of Marchbanks in "Candida" has he been finer. All the song, the laughter and the pity that Synge wrote into a great part, Mr Meredith gets into his performance. Always he is brilliant, and in two scenes, when he makes love to Pegeen Mike and when he builds up his great deed for the edification of admiring villagers, he is showing what acting really should be.

Almost equally important is the role of the capricious Pegeen, and Eithne Dunne, who was brought over from Ireland for the part, plays it beautifully. As Mr. Meredith is the best Christy I have ever seen, so is Miss Dunne the best Pegeen. Fred Johnson who came from Dublin to play Christy's father, is just right for it.

The lesser characters are admirably managed. As the girl's father, J. M. Kerrigan is, as always, a delight; Mildred Natwick is perfect as the slightly predatory Widow Quin; Dennis King Jr. gives the timorous Shawn Keogh exactly the right note, while Barry Macollum, J. C. Nugent and the others are likewise excellent. As you may have guessed, I liked "The Playboy."

PM

OCTOBER 28, 1946

—*Kronenberger*

Synge's Fine Folk Satire

PM Reviews

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

The sons of those enraged Irish patriots who greeted *The Playboy* with catcalls and rotten vegetables can themselves, I think, now only greet it with applause. It has held up handsomely in the 40 years since it was furiously cried down. It remains one of the freshest of folk plays, one of the saltiest of satires—and, best of all, a minor wonder of writing. In a sense, it continues to seem so good just because it is not in any way great. It is a full pint in a pint bottle, not a pint trying to look like a quart.

Theatre, Inc. has done Broadway a service by reviving it, though I do not think the present production can be called anything more than a pleasant one. It has its good points, but it hardly gets all the richness out of the play, or all the fun; and it certainly does not get all it might out of the dialogue. At the Booth on Saturday night the talk did not have all the tang, the lyricism, or—for there is a touch of that in it, too—the finely satirized slightly-too-muchness that it has on the printed page.

Mr. Meredith's Christy, again, was not all it might have been. At times it was very effective indeed, but it didn't grow organically from a spunkless little nobody into a strutting cock of the walk. Nor did Mr. Meredith seem to have all the holding power, the force of stage presence, that he might have had.

As the elder Mahon, Fred Johnson seemed too monotonously growly. I won't so much quarrel with the interpretation, though I think it sacrifices body, as complain that the readings necessary to it flatten out Synge's language. Mildred Natwick, as the Widow Quin, did most to keep the play lively and exuberant, though she occasionally overdid; and J. M. Kerrigan, J. C. Nugent and others were agreeable in smaller roles. But it was Eithne Dunne's Pegeen that for me came closest to being robust and right, to overcome a certain tameness of atmosphere; she had Pegeen's masterfulness and romantic violence, and she had the most feeling for the language.

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The production is, in any case, agreeable enough not to discourage any one from seeing the play. And after a barrage of Broadway wisecracks, what a pleasure it is to be bedded down in *The Playboy's* warm humor; after all the pat, diagrammed stuff labeled satire, what fun it is to share in Synge's series of wild satirical jokes—so far from reality and so close to nature—at the expense of Irish brag and romanticism and hero-worship. The jokes—whether of the girls making a hero of Christy, or of Christy making a hero of himself, or of Pegeen finding that what is glamorous at a distance is ugly at close hand—remain fresh because they are crazy, farcical, a little larger than life, and yet tie in with something psychologically sound. And the whole atmosphere remains fresh because, by satirizing the Irish excess of imagination, it lets us at the same time breathe in something imaginative. But it is, of course, the pungent peasant speech which Synge kneaded and heightened and endowed with perfect rhythm that gives a play that has no great outer drive so much inner life. *The Playboy*, despite its passages of low comedy, has something almost lost to the modern theater: the ability to be, in the same breath, both comic and lyrical.

—Louis Kronenberger

Journal American

OCTOBER 28, 1946

'Playboy of Western World' at Booth

By ROBERT GARLAND

Nobody can tell me, not even Guthrie McClintic, its director that John Millington Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" isn't better than it seemed night before last at the Booth. There, and then, I had the feeling that it didn't quite come off, although, as Theatre, Inc., knows, it should have come off glowingly with its best intentioned cast repeating the playwright's words as Mr. McClintic told them to.

But when, after a long Celtic evening in 45th st., the "killer," who had been Burgess Meredith, went home with his "murdered" father, who had been Fred Johnson, you felt that something still was missing. I did, at any rate! And so did such cash customers as were seated near me. Maybe the thing we missed was spirit. These Irish folk-plays have a way of demanding acting directly from the actor's heart.

More than any Irish folk-play I know, John Millington Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World" cannot live on skill alone. And skill is mostly what it gets hard by the Messrs. Shubert's Alley. It calls for quite a little more.

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Good Cast, But—

On paper, the cast assembled by Richard Aldrich, managing director of Theatre, Inc., and turned over to Guthrie McClintic, artistic director of the revival at the Booth, looks like something special. Why not, with Burgess Meredith, free from Hollywood and the Army, as Christopher Mahon, the paddywhack pagliacco who talks as mean a murder as any man on the wild coast of the County Mayo.

Then Mildred Natwick, free from Prossy and Madame Arcati, as the Widow Quinn. And J. M. Kerrigan, a member of the original Manhattan company, entrusted now with Michael James. And J. C. Nugent, with "Kempy" on his shoulder, pretending to be Jimmy Farrell. And young Dennis King, whose Mississippi was admirable, as Shawn Keogh. And Mary Diveny, Sheila Keddy, Julie Harris and Maureen Stapleton as speaking villagers.

And such authentic importations as Eithne Dunne, making her American debut as Pageen Mike; Barry Macollum, an Irisher to the manner born, and Fred Johnson, an erstwhile member of the Abbey Players and doing right by Old Mahon for the first time.

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Without Potatoes

On stage, the cast assembled by Mr. Aldrich and turned over to Mr. McClintic, is something else again. Each member gives the impression of knowing what he's doing. Too much so, maybe. But when Mr. Meredith, Miss Natwick, Mr. Kerrigan and their fellows get together, they give no great impression of knowing what the playwright originally intended. Or how to play with teamwork.

Which is why nobody can tell me that John Millington Synge's masterpiece isn't better than it seems at the Booth Theatre. Written in high humor, biting satire and beautiful Irish-English, it was meant to be acted just that way. But, last Saturday, only the beautiful Irish-English remained. And, from well down front, that wasn't always understandable. So the piece itself was received calmly, with neither bravo nor potato-throwing.

When, in 1911, the Irish Players brought forth "The Playboy of the Western World," in 39th st., potato-throwing was prevalent. Nowadays, in 45th st., you can't imagine anything being thrown at anybody. And that's exactly what's the matter!

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 28, 1946

By HOWARD BARNES

Reality and Joy

THE revival of "The Playboy of the Western World" at the Booth Theater is an occasion for tempered jubilation. The J. M Synge comedy has been produced with distinction and lyric beauty. Burgess Meredith and his co-players have given each inflection of the script the thoughtful interpretation due a classic. Occasionally they have made the work sing with ineluctable poetry and wisdom. What is wanting is the earthy urgency which can infuse each line and passage of the drama with inevitable wonder and delight. It is the texture and pace of this Theater Incorporated offering which is a bit uneven. If anything, it is too painstaking for complete enchantment.

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The enchantment is there when it is most needed. Meredith's portrayal of Christy, for all its brilliant modulation, is somewhat bemused, but it has tremendous power and depth when the shy farm boy turns into an articulate hero. The final scene, in which he comes majestically and poignantly of age, has compelling artistry. Not a little of this is contributed by Eithne Dunne, who has come here from Ireland to make Pegeen Mike an irresistible dramatic figure. She brings to the revival the sustained warmth, the intensity of contrasting moods, and the eloquence of laughter which the play demands and deserves.

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Reservations are of small account with "The Playboy of the Western World." Synge wrote in the preface to the work, that "on the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy." Both are to be found at the Booth. Guthrie McClintic's direction is frequently too studied for a fluent and rhythmic authority. There are times when the rich speech is inaudible, or fails in the instant communication which sets the comedy apart in the modern theater. These are matters that can be remedied. As a whole this reproduction is something to be seen and cherished.

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Certainly there will be no such ructions as attended the first performance of the play here in 1911, when super-sensitive Gaels considered it a slur on their heritage. The play reflects with absorbing clarity the fiery, magnificent and tender popular imagination to which Synge acknowledged his enduring debt. Christy and Pegeen Mike dominate the action in their bitter-sweet romance, but there are a multitude of facets to the central theme. J. M. Kerrigan is superb as the proprietor of a pub on the wild coast of County Mayo; Mildred Natwick plays the Widow Quin with lusty and predatory enthusiasm, Dennis King jr. is fine as Pegeen's feckless suitor and Fred Johnson is immense as Christy's obdurate da, who refuses to be done in with a loy.

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The company is well-matched and artful. Even the bits are handled with rare skill by Barry Macollum, J. C. Nugent and the others. It is Miss Dunne, though, who is likely to be remembered longest for this revival. She contributes all those qualities to the production which are sometimes lacking in the approach of her colleagues. Here is an actress of assured artistry as well as promise. John Boyt's settings and costumes are right, without being quaintly conspicuous. Quibbling aside, "The Playboy of the Western World" is a welcome addition to a season which is painfully slow in starting.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 28, 1946

Meredith Stars in 'Playboy'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Theater Incorporated has followed its bright "Pygmalion" and its rich Old Vic season with a revival of J. M. Synge's "Playboy of the Western World." So beautiful to read, the play in action is remote and rather tiresome.

It concerns the confidence and acclaim gained by a young Irish Milquetoast who says he has murdered his father. People think him a wonder, and under their glowing eyes he becomes one.

If the same thing happened here today he might be signing autographs and getting the best table at El Morocco.

When in the "Playboy," Christopher Mahon's father turns up, the idolaters are ready to hang him for his second attempt to cleave Dad's skull. A dirty deed in the backyard is another story.

Intermittent Charm.

Despite some fine performances, this production makes of the tale of the little mad tramp of a dreamer a slow thing of only intermittent charm.

Burgess Meredith is starred as the Playboy. His simplicity makes a right interpretation of the clodhopper in escape. He is gentle and anxious, and grows with his startled fame.

His love for Pegeen Mike, who takes him in, is shining. But as he acquires bravado, then has confidence snatched away and tries to regain it, he lacks the strange quicksilver of Irish temperament that makes the whole story possible.

The screen seems to have tamed his projection.

Kerrigan Faultless.

Meredith has always had a gift of reading poetic beauty into lines, sometimes when they had no right to it. He can summon a vision with a speech like the one about Helen of Troy, "with a nosegay in her golden shawl."

It is a stage-hardened cast that supports him. J. M. Kerrigan, as Pegeen's father and the owner of the inn where the Playboy turns up, is faultless in his authority, sober or soused.

Dublin's Eithne Dunne plays his daughter with seasoned verve. She has the volatile passion for whatever she feels at the moment. She is as believable as she is fickle.

Mildred Natwick is the lustful Widow Quin, who would win the Playboy from Pegeen, even if it means blackmail. She is a wise and humorous conniver, though the attitude of the role lacks variety. Miss Natwick is assertive, but before she is through gives the impression of enjoying herself just a little too much.

Some of the most delightful moments of the play are those in which the old boys gravitate barwards. J. C. Nugent and Barry Macollum are flavorsome friends for the proprietor.

Refuses To Be Ghost.

As the Playboy's father, Fred Johnson has a stubborn strength in his refusal to be a ghost.

Guthrie McClintic keeps the play moving as much as it can move. His use of the 1911 Irish bobby soxers is vigorous, and the off-stage races are quite satisfying.

He provides a glowing moment, which Meredith plays beautifully, when the girls follow the Playboy back from his victorious donkey race.

When it is all over you think, as Mr. O'Neill said a week or two ago, that imagination can be a great help to a fellow.

The trouble is that for New York, 1946, Mr. Synge's "Playboy of the Western World" on stage seems to have lost its grip.